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Improvising with the Quadrilateral: An Augustinian Approach to Recovering the Use of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral in the Theology of Preaching

Abstract

This article explores the improvisational nature of preaching through a closer examination of Augustine's view of the theology of preaching in *De Doctrina Christiana*, and an exploration of the Wesleyan framework, known as the Wesleyan Quadrilateral as an additional, but key supplement to developing a theology of preaching which maintains the centrality of scripture, but permits the important addition of improvisation to meet the needs of changing times and congregations.

Keywords: Augustine, Wesleyan Quadrilateral, preaching, improvisation, theology

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Introduction

The question of what the preacher does should not be that complicated. For most, the preacher simply stands in front of a congregation and gives a message from God. However, this is overly simplistic. It does not take into account the reality of what the preacher actually does in order to preach a sermon, the prolegomena necessary to be one that can effectively communicate the Word of God. In this paper, I want to explore what the preacher ultimately does in order to stand up and preach the Word of God.

My thesis is that the preacher is ultimately an improviser. Now, this may sound counter-intuitive as improvisation is usually thought of as an act that is purely spontaneous and only happens in a moment: the exact opposite of the kind of preparation that a preacher does. However, recent research on improvisation in music suggests that ultimately the improviser is one with a solid base of knowledge of a multitude of styles, keys, chords, etc. inherent to music. With this knowledge base, and through interaction with other traditions, experiences, and audiences, the musician makes music. The musician ultimately responds to the call that has been placed upon him or her. And it is this idea of improvisation that I think is ultimately at work in the process of preaching. In order to elucidate this thesis, I make two arguments. First, I examine the theology of preaching at work in Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana*. He sets the trajectory for what preaching as improvisation may look like. Second, I supplement the work of Augustine with recent studies on the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. By doing so, I am able to give a framework for how the preacher anchors herself in scripture while also bringing other elements to play when preaching.

Theology of Improvisational Preaching – *De Doctrina Christiana*

In other places I have written on the nature of Augustine's theology as ultimately improvisational.¹ My basic argument is that Augustine's concern in his writings is not with developing a systematic theology. Rather, Augustine writes in an occasional manner, responding to crises and needs as they arise. His ultimate concern is that the reader/hearer of his works will be attuned to the Triune God that we find revealed in scripture. It is with this desire that he can write in response to various factions like the Donatists and Manicheans, as well as write doctrinal treatises like *De Trinitate*, or the autobiographical material that makes up *Confessions*.

When we turn to Augustine's theology of preaching, we find this impetus to attunement and doing theology in an improvisational mode to be even more pronounced. In his treatise *De Doctrina Christiana*, which is Augustine's handbook for preachers, he lays out a way of dealing with scripture that calls for more than just

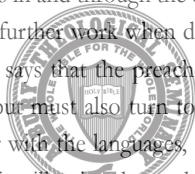
a reading and telling of the divine text. Instead, he wants to find the Word of God in the scriptures and communicate this to one's congregation. As he mentions in the Prologue, his goal is to pass along rules for not only interpreting the Scriptures, but also for dealing with them, especially problematic passages.² In order to do this, the preacher must be tuned into God as God speaks through the scriptures, but also to the world in which one lives in order to communicate the Gospel effectively. Thus, as Augustine says, "There are two things which all treatment of the scriptures is aiming at: a way to discover what needs to be understood, and a way to put across to others what has been understood."³

For Augustine, the first thing that needs to be done is to recognize that all of scripture does one thing: it leads to love of God and love of neighbor. This is the ultimate rule of interpretation for the bishop of Hippo. For him, any way of understanding or communicating the scriptures that does not build up this dual love of God and neighbor has missed the point of the Gospel message.⁴

After the preacher discovers this hermeneutic of love, she can begin to deal with some of the obscurities found in the text. Now we begin to see some of the more improvisational nature of dealing with the scriptures, especially for preachers. Augustine knows there will be problematic places in the bible for those he is teaching to preach. Part of his goal is to help them navigate such places with the help of a variety of sources. The first place he turns to is the scriptures themselves, saying that places with a plainer or simpler meaning can provide clarity for more difficult and obscure passages. The testimony of these plainer passages gives us eyes to see the hermeneutic of love operating in more difficult places.⁵

However, there may come times that plainer passages of scripture do not help with these more obscure and difficult texts. What are we to do then? The answer, for Augustine, is that we begin to use the sources and knowledge that we have from other disciplines and people to investigate the scriptures. As I would put it, we begin to "improvise," the preacher beginning to "play" with the text in a way that includes all of God's truth as it is found in the world of creation.⁶ Augustine begins this process of improvising by turning to the help that other people may provide, saying that the wisdom and knowledge that has been passed on in writings and poems and other such sources is a way of opening us up to the wisdom and knowledge that God has for us in and through the divine scriptures.⁷

Augustine calls for further work when dealing with those signs that are metaphorical in scripture. He says that the preacher must rely not only on other scriptures and other writers, but must also turn to their knowledge of languages. If the preacher is not familiar with the languages, then the preacher must turn to the knowledge of things, helping illumine the truth behind the difficult metaphors

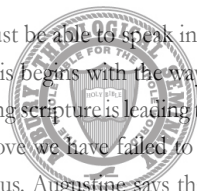


that scripture uses at times.⁸ Furthermore, Augustine advocates turning to other disciplines in order to understand such difficult metaphors. He says that God has instituted the arts and sciences, thus there is value in both studying them and in applying them to the knowledge needed in order to interpret scripture.⁹ History is especially important to understanding the divine scriptures since it is through history that the preacher can tell the time and place and world in which the Word of God has been revealed.¹⁰

Ultimately, the preacher is one who takes a multitude of sources to interpret the scriptures. This is an act of improvisation in that the world in which he or she communicates the scriptures changes on a constant. In lieu of that, we must use all of the resources at our hand in order to interpret the divine scriptures in a way that leads to the love of God and love of neighbor. The improvisation comes in when we take these sources and work them so that we garner such an interpretation. As Augustine notes, this is not to manipulate or perform some sort of eisegesis on the scriptures. Rather, the goal of the Word of God as communicated in scripture is to lead us to charity, especially the love of God and love of neighbor. Scripture builds us into moral people who act in this dual love at all times. And, when scripture does not seem to point to such a conclusion, Augustine exhorts us to reconsider and rethink the text in order to come to such a conclusion.¹¹ Thus, Augustine says, "Scripture, though, commands nothing but charity, or love, and censures nothing but cupidity, or greed, and that is the way it gives shape and form to human morals."¹²

To this point we have mentioned the fact that the preacher is an improviser because of what he or she does with various sources for dealing with scripture. The preacher is one that improvises upon scripture by bringing a number of different areas of knowledge and wisdom to bear upon the interpretation of scripture, ultimately leading to an interpretation that exhorts people to the double love of God and neighbor. However, at this point, Augustine doubles back to ensure that the people being preached to understand the impetus of the scriptures. He criticizes those who would use great patterns of speech or excellent oratory and rhetorical skills, but do not speak in a way that people can understand. He says that there is no point in speaking if the preacher does not speak in a way that people can understand.¹³

So, the preacher must be able to speak in a way that allows the people to understand. For Augustine, this begins with the way of life that preacher leads. He believes that part of interpreting scripture is leading the life of love that it commands us to lead: without a life of love we have failed to understand the impetus of the Word of God as it speaks to us. Augustine says that no matter how we speak, no



matter the skills and practices we bring to preaching, our speech matters little if our life does not match our words. Our life carries the real weight of what we speak.¹⁴

How do we live such a life? For Augustine, the answer is by being attuned to the Triune God as this God is revealed in the divine scriptures. As we explore the bible and understand it, we learn more about the God revealed therein. Augustine says that wisdom comes from exploring scriptures in order to “understand them well and diligently explore their senses.”¹⁵ It is only through our rootedness in scripture that we are able to improvise in a way theologically that allows us to use the various sources, wisdom, and knowledge at our fingertips in a way to preach the Word of God to the people of God. Without such a scriptural foundation, we would not be able to live the kind of life that actually preaches the Word of God.

This attunement to God also comes when we are people of prayer. For Augustine, the preacher must be a person of prayer; in fact, he says that prayer ultimately makes one an able orator. This is because prayer not only attunes the preacher to God, but also to the people one is about to preach to.¹⁶ By praying for the people one preaches to, one becomes involved in their lives, tuned in to what their wishes and desires are. The preacher must be a person of prayer and do so in a way that continues to deepen one’s love for God and one’s love for neighbor. In doing so, the preacher is able to speak in a way that opens the scriptures to reveal the Word of God to the congregation.

To this point, we have analyzed Augustine’s theology of preaching. I have maintained that it is ultimately a way of thinking that is reliant upon improvisation. I argue this because his concern is with finding the meaning the scripture and then communicating that meaning to people. Ultimately, in order to do both, we must rely upon more than just our reading of scripture. Augustine seconds this notion, saying that we must use the knowledge and wisdom available to us in order to interpret scripture, especially the difficult parts. He also says, though, that the real trick is to understand that scripture always points us to charity, to the love of God and love of neighbor. It also should point our preaching to communicating that same double love, opening the possibility up to our congregation. We improvise, then, by bringing together a number of disparate elements, including the people we are preaching to, and trying to put together a coherent, thoughtful expression of the Gospel. We always let scripture dominate our improvisation, but we must work with a number of different forms in order to say something meaningful about the Word of God to the people of God.



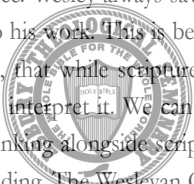
The Wesleyan Quadrilateral

At this juncture, I want to make a switch from Augustine's theology to Wesleyan thought. Explicitly, I will take up the Wesleyan Quadrilateral as a resource for preaching as improvisation. While I am convinced Augustine's theology of preaching is improvisational, I still find it to be convoluted at times. This is because Augustine's concerns for preaching were not always the same as ours. Thus, I think that he can use a modern supplement to make his thought on preaching more explicit. I find such a supplement in the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. With the outline of preaching we find in Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana* supplemented by the logic of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, we can find a theology of preaching that is predicated upon the ability to improvise.

At this point, it would be helpful to briefly describe what I see as the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. I believe it is a modern construct that interpreters find at work in the thought of John Wesley, instead of something that John Wesley makes explicit. As such, I will not deal with Wesley's thought, but only with those commenting upon what they find to be at work in his thinking and subsequent work in the Methodist and Holiness traditions. My concern is to understand the Wesleyan Quadrilateral as a logic, or a way of thinking, at work when we practice theology. I will specifically apply this logic to the type of work that is needed in order to preach the Word of God to the people of God.¹⁷

As we found in the thought of Augustine, the Wesleyan Quadrilateral begins and ends with scripture. Scott J. Jones says, "Scripture...serves as the norm for Christian thinking."¹⁸ For the purposes of a theology of preaching as improvisation, scripture is the source from which we improvise when we are preaching and it is also the place where we find our center if we get lost or lose our place. Scripture is the beginning and end of all preaching because it is the primary religious authority for all Christian thinking and proclamation. Again, Jones provides us with insight into the Wesleyan Quadrilateral when he says, "It is scripture alone that is the rule of our faith."¹⁹ Thus, for the improvisation that occurs when we are preaching, scripture is the rule that dominates our thinking and our approach.

The Wesleyan Quadrilateral, though, brings other sources to bear upon what happens in doing theology and in preaching. These sources are the Christian tradition, reason, and experience. Wesley always saw scripture as primary, but also used these other sources to do his work. This is because scripture, at times, needs a supplement. Wesley realized, that while scripture is always our primary source for preaching, we still need to interpret it. We can do so by bringing these other elements to bear upon our thinking alongside scripture, to see what they say and how they enrich our understanding. The Wesleyan Quadrilateral does so because it



never expects any of these sources to confute or contradict scripture in any way.²⁰ These are brought to bear upon our interpretations of scripture because they bring new life and understanding to the revelation of God that occurs in the biblical text.

Thus, the primacy of scripture does not exist in a vacuum for the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. Instead, scripture is the primary source of religious authority, but we need other sources in order to most fully understand what God is up to.²¹ This is where the improvisational nature of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral comes most to the fore. In order to interpret what God is up to in scripture and in our world, we need to use a variety of sources—mainly tradition, reason, and experience—to work together to provide a complementary means of insight into the truth that is the Word of God.²² Preaching this truth means bringing the insights of tradition, reason, and experience to bear upon scripture in a way that does not overshadow scripture, but enriches it. This is where the preacher has to juggle what sources to use and how these inform our understanding of God. The search for the truth that is the Word of God necessitates the preacher “playing” with tradition, reason, and experience in a way that sheds light on what is happening in scripture. The reason for the play is because the Wesleyan Quadrilateral never provides a formula for how much tradition, reason, and experience we are to use; rather, we pick and choose and play in order to bring light to the truth that is found in scripture. This is because, for the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, “tradition, with proper discernment, reinforces the truth of scripture, as do reason and experience.”²³

The source for theological thinking and preaching most important, after scripture, is the “orthodox tradition of Christian antiquity.”²⁴ This is because the Christian tradition actually provides content to Christian beliefs and practices. The Christian tradition, especially the ecumenical creeds, gives content to the form that our faith takes. As preachers, we can take this content and begin to shape and mold the way that the Christian life may look, especially as this content is put into conversation with the content of Christian scripture. The learning of the Christian tradition and its history helps people understand, appreciate, and realize the truth of scripture in their life.²⁵ It is part of the preacher’s task to lead people through this history and tradition in a way that helps them become grounded in the life that scripture opens for them. The Christian tradition is a place where insight into the Christian faith can occur.²⁶ The preacher takes the Christian tradition and all that it has to say and distills it for his or her hearers so that they can live into the truth that has been revealed therein. The Christian tradition is ultimately a long commentary on the truth that is found in the Christian scripture and, so, knowledge of this tradition can help us gain insight into the truth of scripture. As the preacher knows

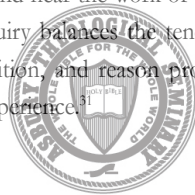


and learns the tradition, the more ably can he or she preach the Word of God since they understand and realize how the Word has been applied in previous generations.

In addition to the orthodox Christian tradition, the Wesleyan Quadrilateral also turns to reason as a source for preaching and doing theology. Here, it is important to distinguish between two kinds of reason that occur in the Quadrilateral. First, there is the fact that Wesley reads broadly and from a variety of disciplines in order to understand the way that the world works, to understand the rationality of the creation. He also expects his preachers to have read widely in order that they are able to bring a variety of kinds of knowledge to bear upon how they interpret the Word of God for the people of God. For him, “plentiful reading would make for better preaching.”²⁷ So, reason helps us to understand the world around us by being disciplined enough to read and experience the world broadly.

The second aspect of reason at work in the Wesleyan Quadrilateral is the actual process of thinking through—or reasoning—something. Wesley was a student and tutor in logic at Oxford and used this training to bring a strong sense of reason to his sermons and his pastoral writings. Reason is not limited to just the kind of rationality that comes from making logical arguments; instead, reason is a mediating construct. As a mediator, reason helps us make decisions about what is helpful and what is not in our arguments and in our sermons. Reason, as such a mediator, is God-given and helps us discover and preach the Word of God by understanding how tradition can bear upon scripture and how scripture works within itself.²⁸

The last source for preaching and theological thinking in the Wesleyan Quadrilateral is experience. For Outler, part of the genius of Wesley is the addition of an existential element, with a vitality of life, to the traditional Anglican triad of scripture, tradition and reason. Wesley’s insistence on a “heart religion” over and against a nominal Christian orthodoxy adds a new dimension to the process of doing theology.²⁹ The role of experience is to provide a reception of the biblical revelation into the heart through the faith that one has.³⁰ As a preacher, the goal is to draw on the experience that one has with God in order to open others to the same type of experience. Our experience—as well as the testimony of others’ experiences—provides a subjective dimension to the preaching of the Word of God so that our hearers see and hear the work of God in our lives. This place of experience in theological inquiry balances the tendency to an overly rationalistic religion, while scripture, tradition, and reason provide a series of safeguards to interpretations of religious experience.³¹



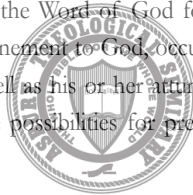
The nature of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral is that it is a dialogue among religious sources, with scripture being the one to set the parameters of what is going to happen in the dialogue. Randy Maddox says,

Wesley's use of the various resources for doctrinal reflection was ultimately *dialogical*. It was not a matter of simply using whichever resource seemed more helpful, or of playing one resource off against another, but of conferring among them until some consensus was found. His expectation of such consensus was based on the assumption that it is the same self-revealing God being encountered through scripture, tradition, and experience—when each of these is rightly and rationally utilized.³²

For the preacher, this means that theological reflection occurs in the dialogue among these four different sources for religious truth. The preacher improvises by beginning with scripture and then using the other three to mold and shape our understanding of God, in line with what was said in scripture, in a way that people can properly hear the Word of God as it is spoken today. The Wesleyan Quadrilateral helps us understand that while scripture is primary in our thinking and preaching, we are never limited to scripture alone to search for God's truth.³³ Instead, the preacher improvises by bringing the truth that God has revealed in the Christian tradition, in our experience, and through our reason to bear upon the way that the world that scripture opens for us may be understood. As Albert Outler makes apparent, in the Wesleyan Quadrilateral we find "a distinctive theological method, with scripture as its preeminent norm but interfaced with tradition, reason and Christian experience as dynamic and interactive aids in the interpretation of the Word of God in scripture."³⁴

Conclusion

In my conclusion, let me bring the strands of my argument together. First, I used Augustine's theology of preaching in *De Doctrina Christiana* to argue that the practice of preaching is ultimately improvisational. In my understanding, this meant that preaching was a practice that took a primary source and tradition—namely scripture and the Christian tradition—and used other sources to elucidate and understand the truth of the Word of God found therein. This can happen because of the preacher's attunement to God, occurring through the careful study of scripture and prayer, as well as his or her attunement to a congregation. This double attunement opens the possibilities for preaching as it gives the preacher



the wisdom to pursue the truth of the Word of God as well as the truth that the congregation needs to hear.

Second, I turned to the sources for improvisation in preaching by turning to the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. Here, I focused on the primacy of scripture as the catalyst for opening people to the Word of God. Scripture is the place for really encountering the revelation of God. However, this revelation is further brought out in other places as well. One such place is the orthodox Christian tradition, which provides a place for the application of Christian insight. Our reason plays a role in understanding God, as well, since God made everything with a rationality and logic. Similarly, our experience provides a subjective place for our knowledge of God, where we can “know” God is at work through the way in which I or we come into contact with God.

The question that the Wesleyan Quadrilateral begs is, “Which sources do we use when?” The answer only comes through an improvisation on the part of the preacher. Scripture is always primary and it is what we improvise upon; however, the preacher cannot rely strictly on scripture but must use the truth found in other places to most fully realize the Word of God in scripture. The improvisation comes by “playing” with tradition, reason, and experience in a way that the Word of God can be heard by the people of God. It is up to the preacher to find the ways and methods for doing this most appropriately while being faithful to the primacy of the revelation of God found in scripture. When the preacher does it well, we find deep, meaningful sermons that open people to the power of the Triune God in their lives.

End Notes

¹ See Nathan Crawford, *Theology as Improvisation: A Study in the Musical Nature of Theological Thinking* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 159-192; idem, “Augustine as Improvisational Theologian: The Musical Nature of Augustine’s Thought,” *New Blackfriars* (forthcoming).

² Augustine, *Teaching Christianity*, trans. Edmund Hill, O.P. (Hyde Park: New City Press, 1996), Prologue, 1, page 101. All references to *De Doctrina Christiana* will be to this translation.

³ Ibid., I.1.1, page 106.

⁴ Ibid., I.36.40, page 124.

⁵ Ibid., II.9.15, page 135.



⁶ Augustine says, "...indeed, all good and true Christians should understand that truth, wherever they may find it, belongs to their Lord..." (II.18.28, page 144).

⁷ Ibid., Prologue, 5, page 102.

⁸ Ibid., II.16.23, page 141.

⁹ Ibid., II.27.41, page 150-51.

¹⁰ Ibid., II.28.42, page 151.

¹¹ Ibid., III.10.14, page 176.

¹² Ibid., III.10.15, page 176.

¹³ Ibid., IV.10.24, page 214.

¹⁴ Ibid., IV.27.59, page 237.

¹⁵ Ibid., IV.5.7, page 204.

¹⁶ Ibid., IV.15.32, page 218.

¹⁷ The application of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral to John Wesley's actual work of preaching the Gospel is sorely lacking in contemporary work on Wesley.

¹⁸ Scott J. Jones, "The Rule of Scripture," in W. Stephen Gunter, et al., *Wesley and the Quadrilateral: Renewing the Conversation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 48.

¹⁹ Ibid., 48.

²⁰ Donald Thorsen, *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral: Scripture, Tradition, Reason and Experience as a Model of Evangelical Theology* (Lexington: Emeth Press, 2005), 39.

²¹ Albert Outler states, "...the Holy Scriptures stand first and foremost, and yet subject to interpretations that are informed by 'Christian Antiquity', critical reason and an existential appeal to the 'Christian experience' of grace..." (See Albert Outler, "The Wesleyan Quadrilateral in Wesley," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 20, no.1 (Spring 1985), 8)

²² Thorsen, *Wesleyan Quadrilateral*, 71.

²³ Ibid., 38.

²⁴ Ibid., 41.

²⁵ Ibid., 94.

²⁶ Outler, "The Wesleyan Quadrilateral in Wesley," 14.



²⁷ Rebekah Miles, “The Instrumental Role of Reason,” in W. Stephen Gunter, et al., *Wesley and the Quadrilateral: Renewing the Conversation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 83.

²⁸ Ibid., 89.

²⁹ Outler, “Wesleyan Quadrilateral,” 10.

³⁰ Ibid., 11.

³¹ Thorsen, *Wesleyan Quadrilateral*, 142.

³² Randy L. Maddox, “The Enriching Role of Experience,” W. Stephen Gunter, et al., *Wesley and the Quadrilateral: Renewing the Conversation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 122.

³³ W. Stephen Gunter et al., “Conclusion,” in W. Stephen Gunter, et al., *Wesley and the Quadrilateral: Renewing the Conversation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 140.

³⁴ Outler, “Wesleyan Quadrilateral,” 9.

